

Quarterly Report January – March 2013

Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali

Funded by USAID / Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA)



Vendors return to the market in Ansongo after major security changes in early 2013

COUNTRY CONTACT	HEADQUARTERS CONTACT	PROJECT SUMMARY
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1. Executive Summary

During the reporting period of January to March, 2013, the residents of the Ansongo Commune in Gao, Northern Mali experienced another dramatic change in their security. In the 2nd week of January, 2013, the “Serval” joint military intervention rapidly altered the control of the region. After several weeks of clashes, the Malian army reclaimed the area.

During the height of the hostilities in Gao, Mercy Corps offered its staff a voluntary evacuation to Niamey and project activities were temporarily on hold. On February 6th, the entire team returned to Gao and re-assessed the needs of the population. Mercy Corps was among the first INGOs to move back. Fortunately, the Mercy Corps offices had no major damage, despite shelling in the area, facilitating a quick return to work.

Immediately upon returning, Mercy Corps conducted a rapid needs assessment to identify gaps in services provided. Mercy Corps improved coordination in Gao and Bamako to further understand the evolving needs in the area. As a result of these exercises, Mercy Corps identified a need for deeper comprehension of the food security situation in Gao. In February, Mercy Corps carried out a mixed-methods food security assessment. The assessment analyzed food security needs through nutrition indicators (SAM...), access to food (HHS, HFIAS), and a market analysis. Based on the results of this study and the cumulative analysis from all information collected, Mercy Corps adjusted their program activities for the remainder of the project and altered the beneficiary selection criteria. 1,312 households were identified to receive 2 months of additional unconditional cash vouchers in April and May. Vendors will also be providing fodder options for beneficiaries to purchase with their vouchers. As the rainy season approaches and the potential for resurgence in cholera, Mercy Corps is increasing the focus on access to clean water and good hygiene practices. The remainder of this reporting period was primarily spent preparing for these new activities.

2. Program Overview

In response to the food crisis and displacement in northern Mali,¹ Mercy Corps adapted its USAID/OFDA-funded *Projet d'Appui à la Sécurisation des Terres et Ouvrages de Réhabilitation des Aires Locales* (PASTORAL) program, implemented across the border in western Niger. Following an assessment in the Gao region of Mali, Mercy Corps determined that a program similar to PASTORAL would help meet the emergency food security needs and build the resilience of 12,000 individuals in the Ansongo district of the Gao region. Mercy Corps is providing immediate assistance to the most affected Malian households in the form of unconditional value vouchers for basic needs and commodity vouchers for fodder.

Mercy Corps recognizes protection, gender and accountability issues to be critical to such a project, hence emphasizing close monitoring of these issues. Mercy Corps worked with all relevant stakeholders including local authorities, religious leaders, and the private sector (vendors) on explaining the program's intentions for the targeted communities. Consequently, Mercy Corps gained acceptance and trust within its zone of intervention, essential to assuring the protection of program staff and the relevancy of the intervention. Moreover, by splitting the vouchers into small denominations and by spreading the distributions over three months, the project mitigated the exposure of targeted beneficiaries to eventual risks (including theft, loss, damage due to pests/weather, jealousy amongst neighbors, etc).

Gender

Mercy Corps continues to give particular consideration to the evolving needs of men, women, boys and girls. During this reporting period, Mercy Corps continued to collect anecdotal evidence and observations of the needs of both genders, in addition to sex-disaggregated data from the food security assessment.

Accountability

Mercy Corps is committed to ensuring accountability to beneficiaries. During this reporting period, Mercy Corps listened closely to the needs reported from the communities themselves and requested a change in activities in response to those needs (based on a rapid needs assessment done immediately after returning in February.)

¹ UNOCHA (2012) "Mali Complex Emergency Situation Report" No5, 22 May 2012.

3. Performance Summary

Sector #1 Logistics Support, Relief Commodities	Vulnerable pastoralists and agro-pastoralists respond to basic needs and reconstitute their assets			
Beneficiaries Targeted	12,000 IDPs: 1,200	Budget:	\$979,261	
Beneficiaries Reached	18,520 IDPs: 0	154% 0%		
Geographic Area(s)	Ansongo Commune, Ansongo District, Gao Region			
Sub-Sector: Non-Food Items (NFI)				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	COMPLETION DATE
Total number of Non-food Items (NFIs) distributed, by type ²	0	Beneficiaries purchase a variety of items based on their household needs	1% of vouchers were redeemed for NFIs	March 31, 2013
Total USD cost of Non-food Items (NFIs), by type ³	\$0	\$423,913	\$513,634	March 31, 2013
Total number of beneficiaries receiving Non-food Items (NFIs), by type, in compliance with Sphere standards ⁴	0	12,000	18,520	December 31, 2012
Additional Indicator				
% of items purchased with vouchers that are food	0	Beneficiaries purchase a variety of items based on their household needs	99%	December 31, 2012

Sector Summary:

Due to the rapidly changing situation that unfolded, Mercy Corps allocated some of the EFSN project staff time to conducting a mixed-methods food security assessment in the project zone.

Food Security Assessment

Following the cessation of hostilities in Gao and the withdrawal of Islamists occupants from Gao and surroundings, Mercy Corps conducted a rapid assessment to measure household vulnerability related to food security in the EFSN target zone compared with areas less directly affected by the conflict (Koulikoro and Bamako). The assessment was also meant to analyze the relevancy of providing supplementary animal feed to vulnerable households of Ansongo, versus the provision of other basic needs at this time. The full report is included in the annex.

² Indicator interpreted as % of items purchased with vouchers that are NFIs.

³ Indicator interpreted to mean total USD cost of vouchers

⁴ Indicator interpreted as total number of beneficiaries receiving vouchers.

The mixed-methods approach to assessing the food security situation in the Ansongo commune provided an analysis of food security from a nutrition and markets viewpoint. The study consisted of three main components: 1) anthropometric nutrition assessment of children under five, 2) households food security survey, and 3) market vendor interviews.

Main findings for the Gao region included:

- ✓ 94% of households experiencing some level of food insecurity in Gao, according to the Households Food Insecurity Access Score (HFIAS);
- ✓ 62% of households in Gao are experiencing moderate to severe hunger according to the Household Hunger Scale (HHS);
- ✓ More than 70% reduction in sales reported by vendors in Gao.

Results from the assessment, coupled with input from the Mercy Corps field team, led to altering the planned project activities to include two more months of value vouchers that allow beneficiaries to select the items they need most, including the option to purchase livestock feed; with USAID/OFDA approval. Additionally, Mercy Corps is supporting the coordinated cholera prevention plans developed by the WASH cluster in Bamako by enhancing community WASH outreach and dedicating 6,000 FCFA of each household's voucher amount to the purchase of soap, bleach, and aquatabs.

Identification of Households' for Voucher Distribution

Following the agreement to modify the second component of the project, which consisted of providing support to livestock via a supplementary animal feed voucher, the project team proceeded to identifying new and extremely vulnerable households to receive unconditional vouchers for food assistance and animal feed (with a small conditional component for hygiene materials). With remaining program resources Mercy Corps determined that it would be able to award vouchers to 1,312 beneficiaries, or approximately 28% of those in need in the zone of intervention. Mercy Corps has stayed in close contact with ICRC, who is reaching approximately 24% of area vulnerable households, to avoid duplication of beneficiaries. In addition, Mercy Corps is working with traditional leaders, village councils, and other stakeholders to talk about the need to spread benefits to as many households in need as possible.

During the month of March, Mercy Corps started a participatory identification of the most vulnerable households in its area of intervention following the same methodology as with previous identification. The same village committees helped select beneficiaries and were instrumental in the beneficiary list validation. Vulnerability criteria were updated to reflect the changing needs, in part as identified by these stakeholders. The main vulnerability criteria used during beneficiary identification included:

- female-headed households without supplemental income;
- elderly without supplementary income,
- Host families fostering IDPs
- Households having less than 2 meals per day;
- Households with more than 3 children under 5 years;

The first three criteria were newly introduced for this new round of vouchers. The identification exercise allowed the successful enrollment of 1,312 households of which 56% are represented by

women. During beneficiary verification spot-checks, Mercy Corps identified that nearly 92% of overall selected households (1,312) reported eating less than 2 meals per day. The final beneficiary selection was completed in April and further details will be reported during the next reporting period. Mercy Corps will eventually reach an overall total of 3,627 households for two unconditional voucher distributions, taking the total amount injected into the local economy to 374,897,000 FCFA (approximately USD \$787,600).

For the conditions earlier described, coupled with the stress market situation in Gao (scarcity of goods, price hikes, irregularity of markets, etc.) and the increased family size noted during the baseline study, Mercy Corps increased the value of the voucher from 37,000CFA (\$77) to 45,000CFA (\$95). During this reporting period Mercy Corps also worked to develop a new voucher design to further tighten controls.

Vendors Selection and Market surveillance

Markets were particularly stressed during the reporting period as a result of the unstable security situation across Northern Mali. In February and March, Mercy Corps resumed regular market price data collection. In March, Mercy Corps collected information on additional livestock products in order to ensure price monitoring of all goods beneficiaries may choose to purchase using their unconditional vouchers. Vendor selection for the April and May voucher distributions were also conducted during the period using a vendor survey form and expression of interest form. Mercy Corps targeted the traditional market-fair days to broaden the number of vendors invited to participate in the program.

Primary analysis of the aggregated data gathered revealed a slight increase in all products imported from neighboring Algeria, such as flour and dairy-related items, while items such as rice, millet, sugar, and vegetable oil remained slightly stable. The price of local beans decreased considerably. Additionally, with the departure of many Arab traders during the military intervention, it was noted that the stocking capacity of vendors have significantly reduced. Of the 30 vendors interviewed in Ansongo, only 43% has a stock of rice, 37% a stock of millet, and 33% a stock of local beans (Niebe). In order to ensure that market prices don't increase as a result of these activities, Mercy Corps monitors prices monthly and has negotiated with vendors to ensure prices remain stable. Throughout the community, prices for staple goods are well known. There are also cultural mechanisms in place to support control of market prices. As one staff claimed, "everyone is family in Ansongo," meaning that vendors are accountable to the community to keep their prices fair and affordable.

Rising issues such as banditry, road blockages and the presence on unidentified armed people during market days led to the complete cancelling of some weekly markets. A few communities resorted to practicing a bartering system at times to enable individuals to satisfy their basic and urgent needs, especially between farmers and cattle keepers.

WASH Related Activities

In January of 2013, Mercy Corps was beginning to carry out hygiene promotion community outreach, but these were disrupted due to insecurity. Before the activities were suspended, Mercy Corps was able to meet with a local radio station to discuss a partnership for hygiene awareness-raising, using key messaging on clean water and water-borne illnesses. In response to the WASH needs identified during the baseline study and the gaps in services identified by the

WASH cluster in Bamako, Mercy Corps began enhancing WASH activities with the EFSN project upon return to Ansongo. For the next round of vouchers, a small amount (6,000 FCFA or roughly \$3 USD) per voucher will be dedicated to the purchase of soap, bleach, or aquatabs (water purification tablets). This information will be reported against the NFI indicator next quarter. These items are already regularly available in local markets and in use in households. Community and household outreach will continue to ensure households are appropriately using the products. Mercy Corps is in discussions with UNICEF to use their training resources in order to improve message coordination with IRC who is working more broadly on WASH issues in the area. Mercy Corps is also working with local water transporters to encourage them to use clean recipients whenever possible.

<u>Sector #2</u> Agriculture & Food Security	Vulnerable pastoralists protect their animal assets			
Beneficiaries Targeted (individuals)	12,000 IDPs: 1,200	Budget	\$666,800	
Beneficiaries Reached	0 IDPs: 0	0% 0%		
Geographic Area(s)	Ansongo Commune, Ansongo District, Gao Region			
Sub-Sector: Livestock				
INDICATORS	BASELINE	TARGET	PROGRESS	DATE
Number of animals ⁵ benefiting from or affected by livestock activities	0	4,000	0	March 31, 2013
Number of people benefiting from livestock activities	0	12,000	0	March 31, 2013

Sector Summary:

Following the prioritization of the needs on the ground, coupled with the availability of green pastures after the return of the rain, and moreover with the new situation created by the three-weeks hostilities in Gao, Mercy Corps opted to merge the provision of supplementary animal feed into the unconditional vouchers to be distributed to 1,312 vulnerable households, as described above. Given the importance of livestock as valuable assets to target households, Mercy Corps decided to include a portion of supplementary feed within the overall voucher assistance. For the reporting period, no animal pathologies have been declared, and “*Bourgou*” (nutritious local aquatic plant for animal food) is available in the markets. Information on this indicator will be collected during the post-distribution monitoring surveys, which have been updated to include this indicator. Mercy Corps is also beginning to implement another program focused on meeting the needs of livestock of vulnerable pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in the same area. These activities will be paired together to enhance benefits to these communities.

⁵ Activities have been reshaped due to new context; will be updated in next reporting quarter.

4. Monitoring & Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation activities for the reporting quarter started with the additional analysis of post-distribution monitoring. The M&E team reviewed and analyzed the data gathered during previous months and looked into lessons learned. From the analysis made, the survey tool was improved to be more succinct as to better inform program decisions. Vendors will also now be asked to provide receipts for goods sold with vouchers so that the M&E team can better monitor what goods beneficiaries are receiving.

Thanks to regular program monitoring and beneficiary feedback, Mercy Corps was able to re-orient program activities to best meet the needs of target beneficiaries. In addition, the vulnerability criteria used were modified based on changing needs reported by numerous stakeholders, including ICRC and the village committees. Whenever possible, Mercy Corps is working to improve triangulation of data in order to better verify information and make the most informed program decisions. During the activities this month, this meant an increased focus on coordination with local and international NGOs operating in the area, both at the field level and in Bamako, to facilitate information sharing and data triangulation. Mercy Corps also solicited support from internal and external experts on markets, resilience, and conflict resolution in order to deepen the understanding of the situation and improve program implementation. Finally, Mercy Corps worked on improving incorporation of qualitative data, including observations from field staff, into reporting.

5. Coordination

Given the new and fragile situation in the Northern Mali, Mercy Corps recognized the increased need for coordination with all stakeholders. Over this period, Mercy Corps coordinated with international, regional and local actors to combine efforts related to security as well as program implementation.

Prior to the suspension of its activities, Mercy Corps together with other international and local NGOs in Gao held regular meetings to assess the security situation and measures to follow. Upon return of the Mercy Corps staff to Gao, the team undertook a formal approach towards understanding the security situation of Ansongo and its surroundings with the local and traditional leaders. These meetings guided the team and the management board in the appropriate path and decisions to take. Mercy Corps met with the “Cadre de Concertation” members – a governing body in Gao, to formally introduce the reopening of its activities.

In an effort to avoid duplication of activities, Mercy Corps strengthened its collaboration with ICRC to coordinate food assistance efforts. It was agreed to share various lists of beneficiaries, and to sensitize village authorities on avoiding households receiving double benefits. Mercy Corps also dialogued with other NGOs, such as ACF and Save the Children, to coordinate on similar WASH and Food Security activities. Additionally, the team met with a women’s civil society organization (MNFPUN) to discuss a potential future partnership around post-conflict management and peace-building. The discussions will continue in the months to come and results will also be shared accordingly.

6. Conclusion

Despite challenges due to the volatile security situation in the region, the Response to Emergency Food Security Needs in Northern Mali program continues to support the most vulnerable households and build resilience of thousands in the Ansongo region. At the conclusion of the project next quarter, Mercy Corps will have reached 181% of the initially targeted beneficiaries through voucher distribution and vital outreach in health and hygiene. In the next quarter, Mercy Corps will complete voucher distribution to 1,312 vulnerable households for the purchase of food, animal feed, soap and water purification products, and continue outreach campaigns to improve health and hygiene practices in target communities. Mercy Corps continues to closely monitor the outputs and outcomes of the program to ensure maximized positive impact and relevance in spite of the complex situation in Northern Mali.